

Wisconsin Women's Council

Feature Article Series
March/April 2005

The 2005 Feature Article Series celebrates and recognizes the role of women in transforming Wisconsin's social and economic climate and improving the status of women across the state.

Women "Making History" in Wisconsin

As Women's History Month celebrates its 25th anniversary this March, it's an appropriate time to step back and see what kind of progress has been made in advancing Wisconsin women professionals in the boardroom and the executive suite.

A recent study, "Diversity and Tomorrow's Profits: Women in Corporate Leadership," a census of women in corporate leadership in the 50 largest revenue-generating Wisconsin-based public companies, showed that women are increasingly "making history" through corporate leadership roles. The report, compiled by the Public Policy Forum under the aegis of Milwaukee Women inc, a professional women's organization, was sponsored by the Brico Fund and a number of other corporations and organizations.

The study found that women hold 9% of the board seats and represent 12% of the corporate officers at the Wisconsin 50. "Wisconsin companies have made progress toward gender diversity during the last 10 years," the report wrote.

Two shining examples of this progress are Thelma Sias, Vice President of Local Affairs for We Energies, and Mary Ellen Stanek, Managing Director and Director of Asset Management for Baird. Professional Dimensions, a Milwaukee-based professional women's organization, recently honored the two women with the Sacagawea Award for their significant career accomplishments, commitment to community and support for the advancement of women.

Sacagawea, the American Indian woman who led Lewis and Clark on their famous expedition to find the Pacific Ocean, was considered a trailblazer, known for her leadership, intelligence, foresight, common sense and adaptability. Likewise, Sias and Stanek are considered trailblazers locally. Both women have achieved professional success, while maintaining a balance between their personal and professional lives. Both also sit on numerous boards and are active in giving back to their community, often in a leadership capacity. And both Sias and Stanek are passionate about accelerating the advancement of women into leadership positions.

"Historically, women have had a significant role in framing changes throughout this country as well as worldwide," says Sias. "Women have strategically used their intuition and keen sense of change, as well as their remarkable ability to build partnerships and manage collaborations, to work with the diversity of issues that position leadership as a natural institution of who and what we are."

While Wisconsin companies have made progress toward gender diversity, they still lag behind regionally and nationally when it comes to gender representation in the boardroom and the executive suite. For instance, 12% of board seats at Chicago's top 50 companies and 14% of board seats at the Fortune 500 are held by women, compared to 9% at Wisconsin's top 50 companies. On the executive level, 14% of officers at Chicago's top companies and 16% at Fortune 500 companies are women, compared to 12% at Wisconsin's top 50 companies.

"In order to effect change, you first have to measure it," says Stanek, who sits on Milwaukee Women inc's Steering Committee. "We have work to do."

Part of this work is being undertaken by the InterOrganization Network (ION), an umbrella organization formed in 2004 by six regional women's organizations, including Milwaukee Women inc. Through ION, these organizations can leverage their combined strengths and influence to increase women's representation in corporate boardrooms and executive suites by publishing annual census reports on the status of women directors and executive officers in public companies in their respective geographic areas.

In a recently published summary of its six member organizations' most recent reports, ION wrote: "The issue of women's leadership in corporations is of widespread concern. We believe America's leading companies can do better and must move faster to improve the representation of women in positions of leadership."

Members of ION have already assisted numerous companies in identifying qualified women who meet their director requirements and, working together, can provide access to a greater talent pool than most companies have yet tapped.

In a separate local effort, Wisconsin Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton recently announced the formation of the *Wisconsin Women = Prosperity* Corporate Advisory Board, a public-private partnership dedicated to elevating the status of women in Wisconsin to foster economic growth. Executives on the advisory board represent some of Wisconsin's largest public corporations. Milwaukee Women inc is also represented. Executives from these companies, which are considered leaders in creating strong working environments for women, will work with the lieutenant governor to organize an interactive statewide network of best practices as a model for Wisconsin employers to increase profitability by supporting the success of women.

The work of organizations like Milwaukee Women inc and ION in measuring and publicizing women's progress in boardrooms and the executive suite, corporate advisory boards like *Wisconsin Women = Prosperity* and role models and mentors like Thelma Sias and Mary Ellen Stanek will all play an important role in the continuing effort to accelerate the advancement of women into corporate leadership roles.

[For more information on this important issue:](#)

Milwaukee Women inc. (<http://www.milwaukeeewomeninc.org>)
Professional Dimensions (<http://www.professionaldimensions.org>)

About this Month's Featured Women

Thelma Sias was named vice president of Local Affairs for We Energies in January 2004. Ms. Sias was appointed assistant vice president of Local Affairs for Wisconsin Electric-Wisconsin Gas in January 2002, now operating as We Energies. In June 2002, she was named to the board of directors of Minergy, a subsidiary of Wisconsin Energy Corp. She was appointed manager of Local Affairs in January 2001. Prior to the merger of the two companies—Wisconsin Electric and Wisconsin Gas—Sias was director-Community Affairs for Wisconsin Gas. In 2000, she was appointed manager to the Customer Relations leadership team for the combined operations of Wisconsin Electric and Wisconsin Gas.

In recognition of her commitment to community service, Sias has received numerous awards including: "Bessie M. Gray Legacy Award," Gray's Child Development Center Inc; "Friend of the Hispanic Community Award," United Community Center; "Woman of the Year," Career Youth Development; "Women Who Put their Stamp on Milwaukee," U.S. Postal Service; "Dr. King Jr. Drum Major for Justice," Sykes Communication; "Outstanding Woman of Achievement," YWCA of Greater Milwaukee; "Future Milwaukee Community Service Award" and "Black Excellence Award," *Milwaukee Times Newspaper/Fox 6*. She is a member of many civic boards, including the Rotary Club of Milwaukee, Inc., the African-American Women's Project, Community Advocates, Professional Dimensions and the Wisconsin Women's Health Foundation.

Mary Ellen Stanek, CFA, has 25 years of investment management experience. She currently serves as Managing Director and Director of Asset Management for Robert W. Baird & Co. with assets under management of \$11 Billion. Additionally she serves as President of the Baird Funds. Mary Ellen is responsible for the development and portfolio management of all proprietary asset management services. She co-manages several fixed income mutual funds as well as a number of taxable and tax-exempt portfolios

Mary Ellen is a member of The CFA Institute, the Milwaukee Investment Analysts Society, Tempo (past President) and the Greater Milwaukee Committee. She serves on the boards of Robert W. Baird & Co., Journal Communications and West Bend Mutual Insurance Company. She also serves on the boards of Aurora Health Care, Boys and Girls Clubs (Board Chair), Children's Hospital Foundation (Board Vice Chair), Marquette University (Board Vice Chair), Marquette University High School, Medical College of Wisconsin, Junior Achievement, Betty Brinn Children's Museum (past President), United Performing Arts Fund, (co-chair 2002 UPAF Campaign) and The University Club. She is a founding member of Milwaukee Women inc. Mary Ellen has been honored with a number of leadership awards.

The Wisconsin Women's Council promotes initiatives that empower women,
serves as a clearinghouse for information on women's programs,
and promotes unique partnerships to address issues affecting wisconsin women.

visit our website at: womenscouncil.wi.gov